



# HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR DIET IN RECOVERY

AND WHY YOU SHOULD



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Good self-care is absolutely central to successful recovery.<sup>1</sup> One of the most important ways to take good care of yourself is to eat a healthy diet. But changing your diet can be a challenge if your addiction led to unhealthy eating habits. These can be hard to break. Taking it slow and implementing small, healthy changes over time can help make new habits stick.

This guide is all about what a healthy diet looks like and how to turn your eating habits into a pinnacle of good nutrition.



A young woman with blonde hair in a bun, wearing a striped shirt, is in a kitchen. She is leaning over a wooden cutting board, carefully chopping green beans. On the counter, there are various fresh vegetables including carrots, green beans, and leafy greens. In the background, a yellow kettle sits on the counter next to a modern gas stove. The kitchen has light blue cabinets and a white subway tile backsplash. A semi-transparent dark blue box with white text is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

# WHY GOOD NUTRITION IS IMPORTANT IN RECOVERY

**FUELING YOUR BODY WITH  
HEALTHY FOOD HELPS TO UNDO  
THE DAMAGE DONE BY ADDICTION  
AND IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH  
ON MANY LEVELS.**

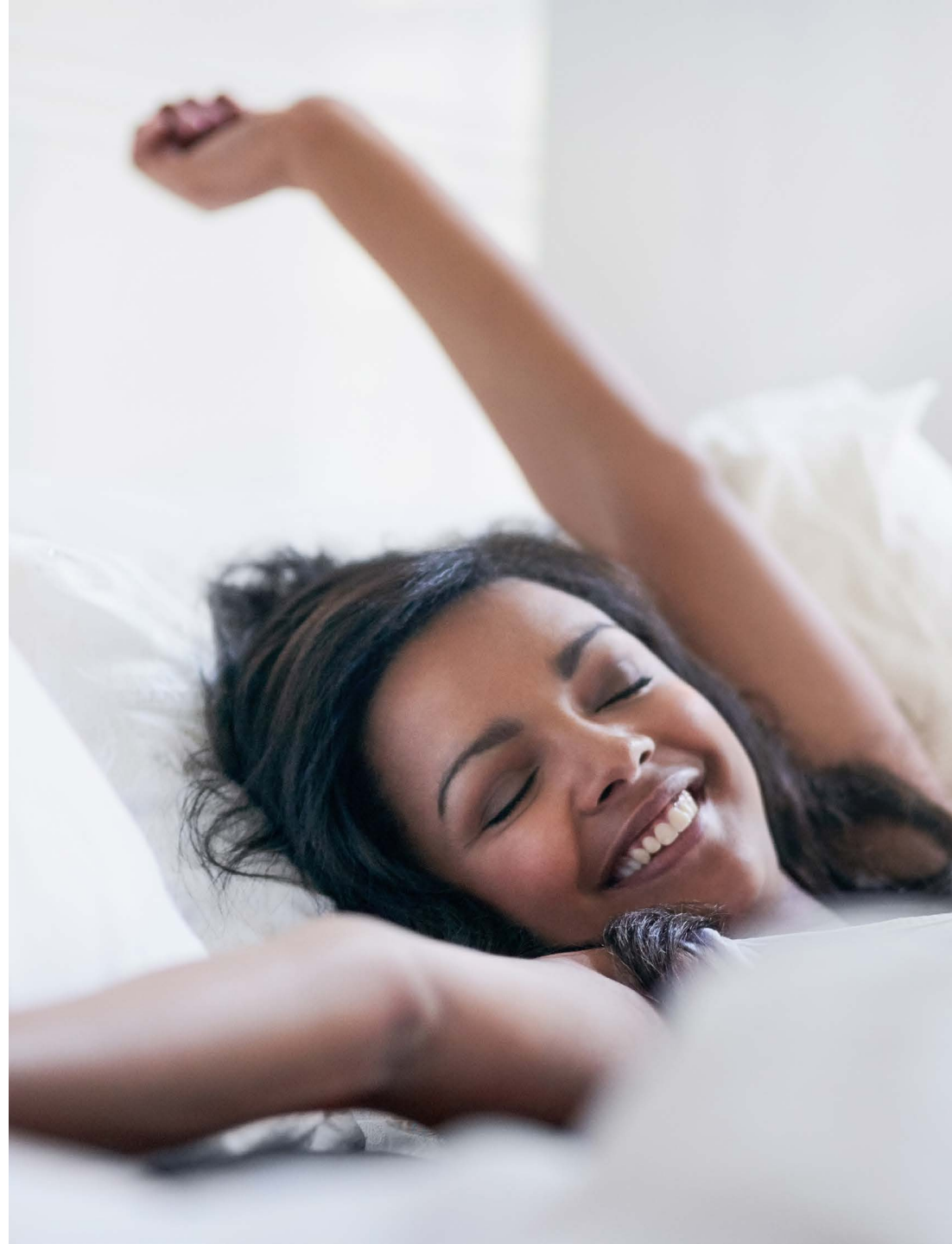
Addiction takes a toll on your body. Frequent or prolonged use of drugs or alcohol impacts your overall health. The poor eating habits that often come with addiction further affect the efficient functioning of your body's systems. Fueling your body with healthy food helps to undo the damage done by addiction and improve your health on many levels.

**Here are some of the things good nutrition can do for you in recovery:**

- ◆ **Reduce withdrawal symptoms.** Good nutrition during detox can reduce the intensity of withdrawal symptoms as well as restore good health and a sense of well-being.
- ◆ **Reduce stress.** Stress is a major relapse trigger, and reducing it is a central focus in treatment. A healthy diet ensures adequate levels of essential nutrients that reduce your stress hormone levels and help you maintain low blood pressure.
- ◆ **Reduce cravings.** Good nutrition helps to reduce cravings by promoting stable blood sugar and correcting nutritional deficiencies that can intensify them.
- ◆ **Improve your mood.** A healthy diet promotes optimal brain function, and that includes improving the function of specific brain chemicals related to your mood.



- ◆ **Improve your sleep.** Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that a deficiency in essential nutrients like potassium, selenium and calcium can cause insomnia and make it difficult to sleep all the way through the night.<sup>2</sup> A healthy diet helps you sleep better, which is another important aspect of self-care.
- ◆ **Manage your weight.** Whether your addiction left you underweight or overweight, a healthy diet can help you gain or lose extra pounds for better health.
- ◆ **Repair cell damage.** Drugs and alcohol affect your body's cells, leading to their dysfunction and even killing them. Cell damage done by an addiction can be repaired with a healthy, plant-based diet.<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ **Help prevent relapse.** The National Institutes of Health stresses that a poor diet in recovery puts you at a higher risk for relapse.<sup>4</sup>







# PROCESSED VS. WHOLE FOODS





The key to a nutritious diet is to eat less processed food and more whole foods.

Processed foods are those that have been altered from their original form. They include deli meats and sausages; bread, pastries and candy; dairy products like milk, yogurt and ice cream; and prepared, packaged foods.

Some processed foods, like natural cheeses, milk and oils, undergo processing to make them safe or consumable. Others, like whole-grain breads and low-fat, low-sugar yogurt, can be part of a healthy diet in moderation. Heavily processed foods, though, contain artificial flavorings and colorings, chemical preservatives, a lot of added sugar and a number of ingredients you can't pronounce. These are the foods you want to avoid most of the time.

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Whole foods, on the other hand, are those that involve no or very little processing. These include fruits and vegetables, eggs, beans, nuts, seeds and whole grains, such as oats, brown and wild rice and popcorn. Whole foods are the basis of a healthy diet and should comprise most of what you eat.

Unprocessed fish and lean meats, such as salmon, ground turkey, pork chops and chicken breasts, are healthy proteins, which are also key for good nutrition. However, it's best to limit your meat to three to six ounces per day or less, according to the American Heart Association.<sup>5</sup>





A COLORFUL, DIVERSE  
DIET IS BEST



Knowing what to eat for good health is the subject of a large body of research, and it's a topic that can be divisive, controversial and much-debated. It can also make you crazy trying to figure out the specific nutrients you need and the best sources for those nutrients.

**Thankfully, there's one very simple diet plan that most experts will agree is very healthy. In just seven words, *New York Times* contributing writer and foodie hero Michael Pollan sums up exactly how humans should eat:<sup>6</sup>**

**Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.**

A healthy diet is one that's varied, colorful and mostly plant-based. The bulk of your diet should consist of whole foods. Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables of all colors: orange, red, blue, purple, green, yellow and white. Different colors indicate different phytonutrients, vitamins and minerals. Additionally, eat lots of different kinds of beans and whole grains. The recipe possibilities for dishes containing just these ingredients are endless.

Add meat and dairy to your diet, if you wish. If you do, choose mostly lean meats, plenty of fish and low-fat dairy products.

The more variety you have in your diet, the more likely it is that you're getting all the nutrients you need for good health.



**COOKING AT HOME  
IS ESSENTIAL**  
FOR GOOD NUTRITION IN RECOVERY





Eating out too often—especially if it's fast food—can take a toll on your body and cause unhealthy weight gain. Restaurant food is typically high in calories, fat, sugar and sodium, and it usually comes in portions far larger than what's healthy. Fast food in particular is made with cheap ingredients and is rife with artificial flavors, colors, preservatives and other unhealthy chemicals. By preparing most of your meals at home, you can control what goes into them for better health. Along the way, you'll save yourself a lot of calories and a big pile of money.

**But cooking at home takes more than just culinary skills. It takes time and planning. Here are some essential tips to make cooking at home easier and more convenient.**

## Redefine Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

According to an article published in the *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, our eating habits are set in childhood.<sup>7</sup> How you ate growing up influences what, when and how much you eat in adulthood.

Depending on how you grew up, maybe you believe that breakfast isn't breakfast unless there are bacon, eggs and pancakes; that lunch means sandwich and chips; or that dinner should consist of exactly one meat and two sides. Examining your beliefs about eating and mealtime and re-defining the "best" way to eat can help you maintain better health as well as reduce time spent in the kitchen.

Research supports a variety of beliefs about the "best" way to eat. But this is a complicated topic, and the fact is, as long as you're eating healthy food and consuming the appropriate number of calories each day, how you choose to eat is entirely up to you. If you find that you prefer grazing on healthy foods throughout the day over eating three squares, and doing so works with your lifestyle, then eat that way. If you like having a big breakfast and some hummus and carrots for dinner, have at it. Whatever works for your lifestyle, your metabolism and your peak hunger times is the best way for you to eat.

The one caveat: Breakfast is, truly, the most important meal of the day. It gives you energy, fuels your metabolism and gets your body systems up and humming. Always eat breakfast, even if it's just a piece of whole-grain toast slathered with peanut butter.





## Learn to Cook

If you don't know how to cook, don't worry; you can learn. Enroll in a class through your local community college, or ask a friend or family member to help you learn the basics. A beginner's cookbook that offers clear directions for cooking meat, vegetables, soups, sauces and other basic dishes can help you master the foundations of cooking very quickly on your own.

## Keep it Simple

Whether you're an accomplished cook or you're starting from square one, keeping your diet simple will save you time and money, and you'll be more likely to cook at home more often.

A typical weeknight meal doesn't have to be complicated, and it doesn't need to have a lot of ingredients. Cook up a protein—roast a chicken, grill a pork chop, bake a fish—whip up a side of veggies to go with it—roast some potatoes, microwave a bowl of peas, steam a handful of green beans—and you've got dinner. Experiment with spices and easy pan sauces to keep things interesting. Keeping it simple requires fewer ingredients, which saves you money on your grocery bill, and it requires fewer dishes, which saves you time on cleanup.



## Plan Your Menu

The last thing you want to do after a long day is try to decide what to make for dinner and then run to the grocery store, where you always seem to end up spending more than you intended. Planning your weekly menu ahead of time can save you an enormous amount of time and money. Look at your calendar to see what your week looks like, and choose a dish for each day you'll need to make dinner.

Make a list of everything you'll need for the week, and buy it all at once.

Planning your menu and making a weekly grocery list can save you money on groceries, because you're not buying things you already have, and you're not making impulsive buys each time you visit the store during the week.



**TIME MANAGEMENT IS ESSENTIAL  
FOR MAKING COOKING AT HOME  
QUICKER AND EASIER.**

## **Manage Your Time**

Time management is essential for making cooking at home quicker and easier. Looking ahead at your week and planning your menu based on what's going on is an important piece of time management. So are making sure you have ingredients on hand and getting the dishes done the night before so that you have the tools you need to get going on dinner right away when it's time.

On busy nights, plan a quick and easy meal. One-dish recipes are easy to find, or you can whip up a quick casserole or make it ahead of time. The crock pot is a valuable kitchen gadget for busy weeks. Toss in the ingredients in the morning, and it'll be ready to eat at dinnertime.

## **Get Into a Routine**

Getting into a dinnertime routine will help preparation, execution and cleanup go smoothly and quickly. Eat at roughly the same time each evening to keep you on a schedule so that time doesn't run away from you. Involve the family in your dinnertime routine. While you cook, have the kids or your partner set the table. After dinner, have them clear the table and help with the dishes. Tidy up after yourself as much as possible while you're cooking to make cleanup easier after dinner. Keep in mind that if the adults in the household take turns making dinner, each person gets plenty of breaks every week.



## Have a Contingency Plan

Have an alternative plan for nights when something comes up or you just can't face making dinner. Don't fall into the trap of hitting the drive-thru on the way home on busy nights or going out to eat on nights you don't feel like cooking.

If you make a little extra food at each meal, there will be plenty of leftovers to graze on later in the week. You can also double some recipes and freeze half for later, such as a pan of lasagna, a pile of burritos or a pot of chili. If nothing else, having a stack of healthy frozen meals on hand can save the day. Check the ingredients list, and choose options that are low in calories, sodium and added sugar and free of chemical preservatives and artificial flavors and colors.





## Make It Enjoyable

Unless you really enjoy cooking, the thought of having to spend so much time in the kitchen may make you hesitate to commit to preparing most of your meals at home. Don't let it. There are ways you can make cooking more enjoyable, and the first is by trying to look at it differently. Instead of regarding cooking as a chore, think of it as making time to take good care of yourself. Think of it as preparing clean fuel for your body to improve your health.

If you like challenges, take on the challenge of learning how to prepare the kind of food that you enjoy eating most. And if all that fails, turn on a favorite podcast to keep you engaged, or make a playlist of your favorite songs to keep you entertained in the kitchen.





# SHOPPING FOR HEALTHY FOOD: THE BASICS





Good nutrition starts at the grocery store. But a trip to the store is rife with pitfalls and traps. Oreos and potato chips may not be on the grocery list, but they somehow always seem to find their way into the cart. Here are some tips for shopping smart when you're eating healthy.

## **Shop the Perimeter: Produce, Meat and Dairy**

The perimeter of the grocery store is where most of the whole, healthy foods can be found. The produce section is usually the first place you encounter, and it's where you should spend the most time, choosing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. The meat and dairy cases are full of healthy proteins, along with some not-so-healthy selections. Choose unprocessed, lean meats and low-fat, low-sugar dairy products.

## **Frozen and Canned Foods**

The frozen and canned food aisles can help you shore up your produce selections, especially in the winter. Look for frozen vegetables without sauce. Choose canned vegetables that have no added salt, and opt for canned fruit that's packed in juice rather than syrup. Choose tuna fish that's packed in water rather than oil. Small considerations like these can add up to big benefits.

## The Five-Ingredient Rule for Processed Foods

The interior shelves of the grocery store are where you find packaged and processed foods. When you're buying these, read the labels and follow the five-ingredient rule: If it has more than five ingredients, it's probably not very healthy. Additionally, if it has artificial ingredients, sugar listed early in the ingredients or ingredients you can't pronounce, it may not be the best choice. Always opt for 100 percent whole-grain breads and pastas, which will generally have fewer ingredients than their more refined counterparts.







# PRACTICAL TIPS

## FOR HEALTHIER EATING

## GOOD NUTRITION IN RECOVERY DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ROCKET SCIENCE.

Good nutrition in recovery doesn't have to be rocket science. Here are some additional helpful tips to keep in mind as you implement healthier eating into your lifestyle.

- ◆ **Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of water to keep your body's systems functioning optimally.
- ◆ **Reduce your stress.** Keeping stress at bay will help prevent stress-eating.
- ◆ **Keep healthy snacks on hand.** Healthy snacks keep your blood sugar stable, which helps to prevent cravings and overeating.
- ◆ **Visit with a dietitian.** A dietitian can help you assess your current diet and make recommendations for changes. They can also determine whether you should be taking vitamin supplements.
- ◆ **Always eat breakfast.** Research shows that people who eat breakfast have more energy during the day, stay more alert and find it easier to maintain a healthy weight.
- ◆ **Limit unhealthy fats.** Unhealthy fat, such as the kind you find in fried foods, candy bars and fatty meats, promotes inflammation, which can cause health problems and negatively impact your mood.





- ◆ **Limit sugar.** An increasingly large body of research shows that sugar is a major culprit behind heart disease, cancer and numerous other health problems. Limit your sugar intake by avoiding sweets for the most part and choosing foods low in added sugar.
- ◆ **Don't think of certain foods as "off-limits."** Depriving yourself of an occasional donut or big, juicy steak is no fun, and it can lead to frustration and cravings. Indulge every now and then—but most of the time, eat healthy food.



- ◆ **Implement changes slowly.** Trying to change all of your eating habits overnight will only lead to frustration and guilt. Start slowly with small changes. For example, begin replacing processed breads and cereals with whole-grain versions. Once that becomes a habit, add an extra piece of fruit to your diet each day. Once you've got that down, cut excess sugar out of your diet. And so on. Every small change will lead to better health and better choices overall.

Good nutrition doesn't have to be complicated. Much of it is common sense. And once you start implementing changes in your diet, you'll notice improvements in your energy level, appearance, focus and overall health. The importance of good nutrition for health and well-being can't be overstated. So take the reins, and start making healthier food choices today.

**ONCE YOU START IMPLEMENTING CHANGES  
IN YOUR DIET, YOU'LL NOTICE IMPROVEMENTS  
IN YOUR ENERGY LEVEL, APPEARANCE, FOCUS  
AND OVERALL HEALTH.**



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